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Conference Abstract

Interns and Volunteers Crucial in Curating and Digitizing Fossil Invertebrates in the Field Museum's Fast Growing Mazon Creek Collection

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Abstract

The Mazon Creek region in Northeastern Illinois is home to a Middle Pennsylvanian (~307 million years old) soft-bodied fossil Lagerstätte of animals and plants that lived along a subtropical swampy coastline. This area was strip mined for coal from 1928 to 1974 and museum geologists and amateur collectors acquired large fossil collections during this time by collecting and splitting millions of nodules unearthed at the mines. These large collections are important because of the rarity of many of the species in the Mazon Creek biota. There are about 250 described fossil invertebrate species from the Mazon Creek region. Fifty-one of these species (mostly insects and arachnids) are represented by just a single specimen in the Field Museum's collection.

Since the 1980's collecting has decreased and the mines have been restored to parks and wildlife areas. The Field Museum maintained a collection of 34,000 Mazon Creek invertebrate fossil for many decades. With the new donations from private collectors in the last three years this collection has grown by 20% and now represents 18% of the Fossil Invertebrate systematic collection. The Mazon Creek is also the most used fossil invertebrate collection accounting for about 38% of loans in the last five years.

Dealing with these large and often unexpected donations adds to the already large workload of the collection staff, so interns and volunteers are utilized to process, catalog, digitize, and integrate these fossils into the museum's collection. In the summer of 2016, interns Mackenzie Best and Yaal Dryer unpacked and sorted into drawers the Thomas V. Testa collection, and digitized the first 1,000 fossils. In 2017, two Women in Science interns, Kate Hodge and Dana Kahn, spent 6 weeks entering the data for 5,000 fossils into our database, numbering these fossils, and printing their labels. Having a well curated collection, as well as volunteer Jack Wittry, who has expert knowledge of Mazon Creek fossils, has also been crucial to the success of these projects. Mane Pritza, a Field Museum volunteer, began photographing these collections and has captured over 11,000 images. Janel Nelson, a former volunteer, has uploaded these images into our multimedia database and linked them to the corresponding records in the catalog module. James and Sylvia Konecny donated their 4,000-specimen Mazon Creek collection in December of 2017, ensuring that interns and volunteers will continue their curation work for at least the next two years.

Keywords

Mazon Creek Fossils, Interns, Volunteers, Digitizing, Field Museum, Fossil Invertebrates, Curating, Collections

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